

## **Report on ‘Practical Sociology: an Agenda for Action’**

**Workshop held 17 October 2016, BPS, London.**

1. The workshop was introduced by Nick Fox, convenor of SOAG. He set out the case for a practical sociology that applied sociological concepts and theories to practical situations. Whereas there was an established form of practical sociology in the US and elsewhere, there was not in the UK, and Nick examined some of the possible reasons for this. He then considered the issues that needed to be discussed. The slides for this presentation are included as an appendix to this report.

2. The following spoke about their own experiences of working as a practical sociologist, clinical sociologist or independent consultant.

**Jan Fritz** (professor of sociology, University of Cincinnati) offered a short history of clinical sociology (CS) in the US. CS is concerned with assessing situations in a range of settings, to ‘avoid, reduce or eliminate problems through a combination of analysis and intervention’. There is a mechanism for accreditation of undergraduate and postgraduate awards in clinical sociology, and for certificating individuals.

**Carol McNaughton-Nicholls** (Truth Consulting) outlined a range of ways in which sociological ideas and thinking can and have been applied in both policy and commercial research contexts. She noted this is often an implied, as opposed to explicit association with sociology, and perhaps the challenge is how we position and promote sociology to wider audiences. Carol also discussed the ethics of working for clients, saying she would not undertake work if ethically compromised.

**Mark Carrigan** (Sociological Imagination) argued that we need to re-imagine a career as a sociologists that is not necessarily all within academia, and with considerable flexibility (Alt-Academia). It can be a precarious existence however, he warned.

**Robert Dingwall** (consulting sociologist) spoke of the desire by those in the private sector to learn about how social processes operate: an analysis that sociology can offer. He uses ‘middle-order’ theories rather than grand sociological theory to solve problems for clients.

**Jane Becker** talked about her use of methodology in applied settings to address the impact of social processes upon people.

**Isabel Fernandez-Hearn** described how an applied or practical sociology can be used to map the boundary between society and the private realm.

3. Following tea, three separate working groups explored issues concerning a) models of working as a practical sociologist; b) skills and knowledge required by practical sociologists; and c) ethics and politics of practical sociology. The groups reported back as follows.

### Models of working

- There is a challenge around defining practical sociology: is it inclusive of all sociologists or in opposition to academic sociology? Furthermore, to what extent is the label ‘sociologist’ recognised in the outside world?
- Can there be vocational rather than academic routes into practical sociology? There is a need for an entrepreneurial mind-set that identifies gaps in the market.
- Practical sociologists can offer alternative perspectives that put people and their actions in context: this can be a basis for how we undertake this work.

- Doing case work can demonstrate problem-solving and practical applications of sociology.
- Is there is a paradox between being inside an organisation and thus more effective or outside and thence more trusted in terms of objectivity?

### Skills and Knowledge

What a sociologist can bring to a situation is based upon practices, skills and dispositions.

The range of practices of a practical sociologist will include:

- Demonstrating the ways that social and cultural factors link individual experience to the public domain of events.
- Working collaboratively.
- Facilitation.
- Engaging with people.
- Public debate.
- Training others to think sociologically.

Skills will include:

- Reflexivity
- Reasoning and analysing complexity.
- Negotiating
- Applying theory.
- Communicating authoritatively and clearly.
- Dealing with uncertainty.
- Applying a critical perspective.
- Qualitative research skills

Dispositions of a practical sociologist may include:

- Humility.
- Sensitivity to complexity.
- A pluralist orientation.
- Scope and range.

Skills need to be updated regularly.

### Ethics and politics

Practical sociology must be constructive (as opposed to view of academic sociologists as moaners/whingers). Need to use critical understanding as a means to improvement.

Academic sociology is utopian; practical sociology may need to seek compromises.

The BSA Code of Ethics is not particularly helpful in practice, as we need to consider issues such as:

- What is the client relationship? Raises issues of co-production of knowledge; partnership.
- Practical sociology is different from management consultancy because of its criticality, sensitivity to social contexts and understanding social licence.

- Sociology can be used to broaden stakeholders and goals of an organisation to include being a good citizen.
- Role of mediating and communication between different groups by using local vocabularies and concepts.
- Can global South emphasis on human rights be an alternative basis for ethics and politics?

4. The workshop concluded with a discussion of prospects and next steps. Issues raised included:

PS needs to be both critical and constructive.

We should agree on a name (practical sociology? applied sociology?) and start to use this to promote the perspective internally and externally.

We need to develop our own identity but use all the resources afforded by the far more advanced developments of practical and applied sociology elsewhere.

We need to have a more effective web presence and optimise SOA web pages for searching.

A way to promote acknowledgement of practical sociology would be to encourage BSA members to add a non-academic affiliation to their academic one.

#### Next steps

- Establish a collaborative network and community of practical sociologists.
- Develop case studies of PS, including from NGOs, and from the media.
- Link to the ISA RC46 network on clinical sociology.
- Explore opportunities for students to undertake practical sociology.
- Identify practice-based units in undergraduate curricula.
- Engage with PhD students around alternatives to dwindling numbers of academic posts.
- Develop internships in PS.
- Re-badge existing jobs as PS.

Thanks to all who participated in the workshop. The next event will take place in mid-2017. One possibility is for a 'Masterclass in practical sociology' which would aim to pass on and develop practical skills and knowledge in participants.

**Would you like to help take this agenda forward? If so, please contact Nick Fox, convenor, SOA: [n.j.fox@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:n.j.fox@sheffield.ac.uk)**